

# Downtown Revitalization and Historic Preservation in Small Town America: A Case Study of Tarboro, North Carolina

E. Watson Brown  
Wes Hankins

*Tarboro, a small town of 11,000 in eastern North Carolina, was incorporated in 1760 and possesses a rich heritage. In recent years, however, Tarboro has struggled to overcome economic decline and create new opportunities for growth and development. This article describes Tarboro's efforts, focusing on the town's creative combination of downtown revitalization and historic preservation with economic development.*

Tarboro's economic decline reached new heights in the 1960s and early 1970s. New industries stopped locating in the town; stores closed on Main Street; older neighborhoods became less fashionable and showed obvious signs of decay. The very fabric of the town was weakening as the young moved away, leaving Tarboro for the opportunities of larger cities.

The year 1974 was a turning point. In that year, Tarboro was notified by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) of its participation in the new Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The town then hired a town planner to work with community leaders and citizen groups to formulate plans for the redevelopment of Tarboro.

A set of action plans was drafted to channel funds toward numerous projects. These plans focused on the rehabilitation of older neighborhoods surrounding downtown Tarboro and the revitalization of the downtown itself. The philosophy was simple: the renaissance of downtown neighborhoods would help spur the rebirth of the downtown commercial area. This process recognized the need for more information, and the following studies were commissioned:

- Land use plans and specific action plans were developed and implemented with the assistance of undergraduate classes and interns from the Urban and Regional Planning Program at East Carolina University.
- *Tarboro Historic District Study*, developed with the assistance of a graduate class from the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill, recommended policies and regulations for an historic neighborhood on two sides of downtown.
- *Tarboro, North Carolina: A Design Development Plan*, developed by a graduate class from the School of Design at N.C. State University, included urban design guide-

lines and specific renovation proposals for the historic commercial core.

- *Commercial Market Analysis: Tarboro, North Carolina*, conducted by Zuchelli, Hunter, and Associates of Annapolis, Maryland, studied Tarboro's economy and helped the town in making economic development decisions.

These studies and reports stressed that Tarboro should:

- Focus efforts on preserving the town's numerous historic sites and districts.
- Improve marketing efforts to increase awareness of Tarboro's history and unique resources.
- Capitalize on the town's central location surrounded by larger cities. Tarboro's size and location had been viewed as a negative factor, due to out-migration of retail dollars, but it could become a positive element, with Tarboro serving as a special hub in the region.
- Seek to attract small, specialty stores rather than large, regional, or national retail chains.
- Target economic development efforts not only on industrial recruitment, but also on residential development. Due to its central location near larger cities, Tarboro could become a bedroom community.

---

*E. Watson Brown, hired in 1974 as Tarboro's first town planner, served in that position until 1985. He received a master's degree in planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1974. He is currently senior planner in charge of comprehensive planning for the city of Raleigh.*

*Wes Hankins is associate professor of planning at East Carolina University. He received a master's degree in planning from Florida State University. He is co-editor of The Guide to Undergraduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning, Third Edition.*

- View additional residential development in and around downtown as a key to stabilizing the commercial core.

## Funding

With these plans and special studies completed, the town began the task of finding money to implement the recommended projects. Over a ten-year period, Tarboro was able to generate over \$30 million for the revitalization of downtown neighborhoods and the commercial core. Funding sources included private citizens, local businesses and industries, local and national foundations, and state and federal agencies such as HUD, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, the N.C. Housing Finance Agency, and the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development.

## Neighborhood Preservation

The Tarboro Historic District was established in 1976. This overlay zoning district regulates all exterior property alterations in a 45-block area on two sides of downtown. The designation of a historic district accomplished many things: it increased public awareness of Tarboro's history; it provided a distinct neighborhood image and pride; it helped to stabilize and even increase property values; and it established a definable area for both public and private rehabilitation investments and public improvements. Since the creation of the district in 1976, the following have occurred:

- *Rehabilitation and Restoration.* Numerous architecturally significant homes were restored privately, and over forty renovations were performed through public incentive programs offering low-interest loans and grants. The availability of grants to low- and moderate-income residents preserved the neighborhood income mix and forestalled the gentrification that has occurred in other historic districts. Historic rehabilitations extended into adjacent minority neighborhoods, where several houses significant to local black history were restored.
- *Public Improvements.* Public improvements, including resurfaced streets, improved drainage systems, and better sidewalks, were made without disturbing trees and other significant neighborhood features. New sidewalks were tinted to blend with older walkways, and two streets were redesigned so that traffic islands protected older trees. New street lights placed in several areas of town are replicas of the 1920s art deco lamps that line Main Street, and new street identification signs match older signs. These improvements were

costly, but they respect the character of the district and make it a more desirable residential area.

- *Landscaping.* A landscaping and tree-planting program, in effect throughout the town for fifteen years, planted thousands of street trees and established a routine maintenance program to care for older trees. The town has a full-time horticulturist to design and oversee landscaping programs. The Town Common, a 25-acre open space set aside by the founding fathers in 1760, is carefully maintained and has become one of the most significant historic open spaces in the South. At the western end of the Town Common, the restoration of an 1850s Cotton Press created an additional focus area for tourists. The town of Tarboro, working with a local garden club, landscaped a neglected ravine adjacent to the Cotton Press as a nature trail. The resulting McBryde Trail and herb garden won a national award given by the U.S. Association of Garden Clubs in 1981.
- *Focus on Tourism.* With plans identifying tourism as a potential industry for Tarboro, public relations became a function of the town planning department, which published brochures, placed advertisements in regional and national publications, and put Historic Tarboro on state road maps and other tourist literature. This additional publicity has led to regional recognition and new investments. Numerous persons have decided to live and work in Tarboro as a result of touring the area, and a major motion picture was filmed in the town in 1986.
- *Historic District Walking Tour.* The U.S. Department of the Interior designated a walking tour of the historic area as the Tarboro Historic District National Recreation Trail. Tourists are guided along the trail by a color brochure.
- *Renovation of the Blount-Bridgers House.* One of the

most significant accomplishments was the adaptive renovation of the Blount-Bridgers House (circa 1808) as a civic and cultural center. The three and one-half story mansion, built by revolutionary war General Thomas Blount, now serves as an art museum, tour headquarters, meeting facility, and recital hall, and is also leased for private parties and receptions. To fund this restoration, almost \$325,000 was raised by a local citizens committee that worked with town officials. Half of the total was donated by local businesses and individuals; the remaining funds came from public and private agencies and foundations. Operating funds come from annual contributions by the town of Tarboro, Edgecombe County, and private efforts.

In addition to preservation efforts in the Tarboro Historic District, revitaliza-



A home in the Tarboro Historic District.



tion projects were undertaken in two neighborhoods adjacent to downtown. Over \$5 million in public funds were invested in the Panola Heights area, a low- to moderate-income minority neighborhood, to improve homes, streets, water and sewer systems, storm drainage and flood control, and landscaping. As in the historic district, low-interest loans and grants to both homeowners and landlords resulted in a dramatically improved housing stock. Since a large portion of the neighborhood fell within a National Register Historic District, rehabilitations were sensitive to the historic elements of individual structures. In two cases, paint research on particularly significant houses was used to determine original Victorian colors and to serve as models for other renovations.

On the opposite side of downtown, the Deans Heights area, a low- to moderate-income mill village, also underwent revitalization. This project saw the investment of approximately \$3 million in public funds for street improvements, water and sewer line replacements, storm drainage improvements, landscaping, and rehabilitation. One turn-of-the-century mill house, threatened with demolition for a street-widening project, was moved and restored to its original appearance. The renovation served as a model for other rehabilitations by showing that historic preservation does not deal solely with the architecturally significant mansions of the well-to-do. Preservation can and must reflect the history of working people and their influence on the growth and development of an area.

The stabilization of the historic district, Panola Heights, and Deans Heights preserved a large residential population base that needed the services and goods of downtown. The next step was to strengthen the downtown itself.

## Downtown Revitalization

In 1963, a plan for the redevelopment of downtown Tarboro called for the clearance of several blocks on either side of the commercial area for parking and future development. Fortunately this plan was shelved. The proposed demolitions would have leveled a large portion of the historic district and significant commercial buildings in lower downtown.

With funding provided by the CDBG program in 1975, the town began the planning effort needed to reverse the



*Downtown revitalization.*

steady decline of downtown Tarboro. When plans were completed, town leaders began the arduous task of packaging and seeking funds to implement a variety of public and private improvements for downtown. The first step was to tackle the most significant element of the downtown plans--attracting residential development.

By chance, two processes occurred in 1978. Town leaders wanted residential development; Howard Memorial Presbyterian Church wanted a quality life-care retirement center in Tarboro. Through careful negotiations, the ideas merged. Market studies convinced the church that downtown would be a good location for its facility. The town agreed to participate by seeking funds to acquire the necessary site and by taking steps to revitalize the surrounding commercial areas. Although this was a simple concept, it took almost two years to package the project.

In 1979, an application was filed with HUD for an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) that leveraged projected private investments of the Presbyterian retirement center, named *The Albemarle*, with public expenditures for overall downtown revitalization. The grant was awarded in 1980. The package included funds for site acquisition and installation of utilities for the Albemarle, acquisition and development of Riverfront Common, acquisition and development of three off-street parking lots, establishment of a low-interest loan program for commercial properties, installation of brick sidewalks and landscaping along Main

Street, various street improvements, and acquisition of deteriorated commercial buildings in lower downtown.

The funding for this program came from many sources. The UDAG itself amounted to \$2.66 million, which in turn leveraged \$3.39 million in other public investments and \$16.7 million in private funds, for a total of approximately \$23 million. For a town of 11,000 people such an investment had a tremendous impact on the local economy.

In 1980, the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated

Tarboro as one of only thirty cities nationwide to participate in the National Main Street Demonstration Program. This program solidified Tarboro's plan for weaving historic preservation into downtown revitalization and economic development.

The National Main Street Program was the catalyst



*Housing rehabilitations in the Panola Heights area, a low-income minority neighborhood, were sensitive to the historic elements of individual structures.*



needed to induce commitment from downtown merchants to support and participate in the revitalization effort. The Main Street approach has four focus areas--design, economic restructuring, promotion, and organization. Each element was incorporated into the downtown planning program and coordinated with activities planned under the UDAG project. Highlights of the more significant downtown projects include:

- *The Albemarle.* The \$14.4 million Albemarle Retirement Center, completed in 1984, contains 150 apartment units and forty skilled nursing beds. The complex is located on a seven-acre site adjacent to Main Street in the once-deteriorated lower downtown area, and its buildings are sensitive to the architecture and scale of downtown Tarboro. The facility offers a total, life-care environment for middle- to upper-income persons who come from Tarboro, eastern North Carolina, and several other states. The complex includes a medical and nursing wing, dining facility, auditorium, social and cultural rooms, a bank, beauty salon, and landscaped private courtyards. This town within a town has over 200 residents and approximately 120 employees.
- *Courthouse Square.* Courthouse Square, completed in 1981, created a major open space in the heart of downtown Tarboro. The \$700,000 project provided a beautifully landscaped green and a visual link from Main Street to the architecturally significant Edgecombe County Courthouse. Landscaping includes azalea beds, iron fencing, wide brick walkways, large trees and an oval reflecting pool for the courthouse.
- *Downtown Landscaping.* Landscaping along Main Street dramatically improved the visual quality of the downtown area. New brick sidewalks, restoration of the original art deco lamps, cast iron grates containing Darlington oaks, and underground utilities have unified the urban environment from Riverfront Common to the Town Common. The project, funded by the UDAG program, cost approximately \$700,000.
- *Downtown Renovation.* Downtown Tarboro, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, has numerous buildings that are both historically and architecturally significant. Through the Main Street program, free architectural assistance was provided to store owners to assure historically appropriate renovations. A program of reduced interest loans and grants (as well as federal

tax credits) offered private incentives. Private lending institutions in Tarboro set up a \$1.5 million loan pool, which produced more than thirty historically sensitive renovations. This rehabilitation program resulted in 343 new permanent jobs and 157 construction jobs.

- *Off-Street Parking.* To make downtown more accessible and competitive, funding was secured for the acquisition of land and construction of four off-street parking lots. The lots, designed to be as unobtrusive as possible, are hidden behind Main Street shops. Fencing and vegetation buffer the lots from the street. Several stores completed rear renovations to provide pedestrian access from the parking lots; however, parking and two-way vehicular access remain on Main Street. The planning department and downtown merchants determined that any removal of parking and vehicular access (or malling) on Main Street would greatly harm the marketability and economic health of downtown.
- *Riverfront Common.* The area around the Tar River, which forms the eastern boundary of downtown, had become overgrown and derelict over the years. With the Albemarle completed directly across the street, the town felt that the area should be improved, not only for use by Albemarle residents but for the enjoyment of all citizens. The development and landscaping of Riverfront Common, part of the 1760 Town Common system, was completed in 1983. Most of the area was left in a natural state that features large cypress and poplar trees, while other areas were landscaped with azalea gardens and walking trails. Several dilapidated structures were acquired and demolished to create necessary open spaces and reclaim portions of the original public common.



*Courthouse square is the focal point of downtown Tarboro and best symbolizes its revitalization efforts.*

One key aspect of the downtown urban design plan dealt with linkages of open spaces. These projects have created a visual and pedestrian link between the Town Common on the western end of downtown and Riverfront Common on the eastern end. Courthouse Square forms a perpendicular axis in the center.

## Conclusion

Tarboro's accomplishments are extraordinary in light of its size and economic base. A revitalization program such as the one in Tarboro takes time, often years, to reach fruition. It also takes long hours of work and great amounts of creativity, patience, and stamina--and funding, of course, is crucial. But other small towns can conceive and imple-

ment similar programs.

Success often boils down to the personalities, degree of commitment, and leadership qualities of a handful of people, who take it upon themselves to really do something about their town's problems. The key to Tarboro's success was a team of dedicated community leaders who took some extraordinary measures. Remarkable projects resulted, and terrific economic gains were realized.

Planners in Tarboro spent many hours with representatives of communities from several states discussing the merging of historic preservation with downtown revitalization. After working with these delegations sent to learn "how Tarboro did it," it became easy to predict which of those communities could do it too. Survival for many small towns depends on community leaders that are willing to take creative measures to keep the town competitive. And the word *competitive* is used loosely, for there are many instances in which a small town can never regain the economic health of an earlier era.

Tarboro was aggressive in securing state, federal, and private grants. Of course, many governmental sources are no longer available or have been reduced. But regardless of the funding source, it is necessary to have a town planning staff that not only plans, but also seeks funding for the proposals outlined in the plans. Someone on the staff must keep abreast of changing laws and regulations and the variety of funding sources, both public and private, that are available for making an abstract proposal into a concrete reality. Creativity is a key word in this process. The most unlikely funding source quite often becomes the missing link in making a project workable.

Two additional points should be stressed regarding the Tarboro experience. First, good, solid planning is a prerequisite to successful project implementation. Second, area universities can provide excellent and affordable resources for smaller communities.

In Tarboro, much remains to be done (see *On the Horizon*, opposite). Even with all this effort, the town continues to be overshadowed economically by its larger, more dynamic neighbors. The keys to Tarboro's success are the recognition and understanding of its role in the region and the development of plans which accentuate and promote its historic small town atmosphere. □

## References

- Tarboro Historic District Study*, March 1976, 61 pp., Urban Design Class, Department of City and Regional Planning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Tarboro, North Carolina: A Design Development Plan*, 1977, 53 pp., Interdisciplinary Design Team from the School of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina.
- Commercial Market Analysis: Tarboro, North Carolina*, May, 1978, 73 pp., Zuchelli, Hunter and Associates, Inc., Annapolis, Maryland.

## On the Horizon

Tarboro Planning Director Lorenzo Carmon says that "Downtown Tarboro is a bustling place from 8 to 5 on weekdays, but at night and on weekends it is a little quiet." He cites a special need for downtown restaurants and other attractions that will entice people to the area during non-business hours.

Additional grants and investments in downtown Tarboro may lead to some of these changes. The town recently received a \$100,000 grant from the N.C. Main Street Incentive Program, which will be used to fund additional downtown rehabilitation projects. The town hopes to rehabilitate thirteen to fifteen downtown properties by using these funds to make 10 percent incentive grants (in which 90 percent of the rehabilitation costs come from private funds). Through the combination of public and private monies, the town is expecting a total investment through this program of \$1.3 million.

New stores are going up on the "100" block of Main Street, across from the Albemarle. These structures are being built by a private developer on property purchased and cleared by the town through UDAG funds. Additional properties have been renovated in the "200" block.

Tarboro is fortunate to have a committed downtown merchants group, which meets weekly and plans downtown festivals and other events. The group began meeting actively when rumors of a suburban shopping mall began a couple of years ago. Though the mall has not been built, other shopping centers have been built on the outskirts of Tarboro in recent years.

Two structures on Main Street have been renovated and converted to mini-malls. Carmon notes that such mini-malls have not been successful nationally, but they have worked in Tarboro. In citing factors for this success, Carmon points out that the malls serve as a bridge between parking lots and Main Street businesses. In one of the mini-malls, most of the space is used for offices, while the other mini-mall is primarily retail.

Another important factor in assessing the health of downtown Tarboro is the number of persons employed there. As the county seat, there are numerous employees in county administrative offices, the county courthouse, and attorney's offices. Carolina Telephone has over 500 employees at its downtown Tarboro headquarters.

On the home front, residences in Tarboro continue to be renovated and restored. HUD 312 rehabilitation funds have been used to restore four homes in the historic district in the past few months. Additional assistance for homeowners in the historic district as well as in other neighborhoods should become available soon, under the restructured HUD 312 program.

Though sources of funds have changed, leaders and citizens in Tarboro continue to use innovative methods to secure the public and private funds needed to maintain the revitalization efforts begun over fifteen years ago.

-- Dale McKeel